



The Katharine Ordway
Natural History Study Area

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ORDWAY BULLETIN
No. 73

MACALESTER
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

An ACTIVE RESIDENT at ORDWAY.

She wasn't very big but she was fiery, a trait displayed by all her species (Parus atricapillus). Chickadees are delightful birds who fill a large niche in nature with their tiny bodies and tireless energy. At Ordway they are omnipresent although more in evidence during cold weather, their presence being accentuated both by the bleak conditions and by the scarcity of other birds. A large part of the Chickadee population remains at Ordway throughout the year; however, during the summer months they are inclined to slip into the heavily-wooded areas for their nesting activities. Therefore they are not much in evidence until late October when they begin to return to the habitation sites where they are apt to get a handout in the form of sunflower seeds which they dearly love.

One day - it was Christmas Day, 1972 - my attention first came to one of these little residents of Ordway when I placed a band on its leg and released it into the environs. It was a calm day with heavy overcast and a misty drizzle which contained a few flurries of snowflakes. The bird was young, probably hatched that year and so would have been about 6 or 7 months of age at most.

Some birds are "trap-happy", tending to return again and again and risk recapture in their search for food. This is particularly so of Chickadees during the cold months and No. 1300-88176 excelled at this, returning to my traps for a second time on Jan. 12th and eight more times during the late winter of '72-'73. It was quite a long time - Jan. 7, 1974 - before I had another encounter with this little visitor but it was a friendly year for the two of us, a total of 41 visits, the final one on New Year's Eve day. The year 1975 opened with a visit and a total of ten visits during the year. In 1976 there were some 13 visits but in 1977 only two - one of them on Jan. 7th and another on Nov. 5th. In all there have been 76 re-visits from this hardy little creature.

It was late in May 1976 that I discovered much more about my little friend - she was a female! Chickadees ordinarily are difficult to distinguish as to their sex; they all look and act alike, being energetic and aggressive and cute. These similarities in appearance are no impediment to them for I discovered that 1300-88176 was about to become a mother. I found her sitting on a nest I had been watching for several days and in which I had observed the appearance of seven Chickadee eggs. Now, on May 28, 1976, the eggs had hatched - all seven of them - and she was brooding her young, covering their precocial nakedness with her own tiny body, fluffed out so as to give cover to all of them. She did not stir from her place and I lifted her from the nest long enough to ascertain her leg band number before returning her to her primeval duty. She seemed undisturbed by this intrusion. I remember thinking that my friend was quite old - at age 4 or 5 - to be bringing off such a big nesting. A few days later I returned and placed bands on her offspring. I continue to look for evidence of the survival of these siblings but thus far none has returned.

She had her picture taken once: A local news photographer happened along on the occasion in October 1976 of one of her re-visits and she sat surprisingly quietly on my hand while being "mugged". She was slightly above the average weight for her species, fluctuating between 11.4 and 13.3 grams during the years, keeping her "figger" through a restricted diet and great physical activity under arduous conditions. She had spunk beyond that of most birds - and that is saying a lot, for there are few things in the world which rival a Chickadee's tireless energy and unrelenting aggressiveness. I have never encountered one which did not immediately indicate its impatience and disapproval by attacking my finger, sometimes biting with its tiny beak and often hammering resolutely with its beak-tip in the manner of a very small woodpecker. There is never any doubt as to the intent of their onslaughts for they attack deliberately and purposefully rather than lashing out in haphazard frenzy. One student who had felt the furious nippings from one of them fantasized upon a pair of fifty-pound Chickadees took over and ruled the world. Such would not be an unlikely situation if fantasy should ever permit the existence of some creature with commensurate energy.

Well, what ever happened to little Mrs. 1300-88176? (What boorishness - reducing such an alert and vital creature to a mere number!) She is still around this part of the world; in fact, I encountered her again this morning (Nov. 5th) feeding on the bait in a ground trap and fiercely attacking my hand and declaiming in her tiny raspy voice. When I had released her and watched her small body flit away toward a nearby tree in that fluttering-leaf sort of flight typical of Chickadees I could not help harboring the hope that she would stay around for a few more semesters. She must be some sort of a driving-force in the local Chickadee community; she certainly has impressed me over the years.

What will happen to her?? She will brave the ardors of another Minnesota winter, taking shelter in the depths of the oak forest and roosting in the clusters of oak leaves still attached to the trees, venturing once or twice a day to the nearby habitations for food (and risking temporary incarceration) before returning to her haven. She will respond in the springtime to the mating instinct and continue in each season according to nature's primeval stirrings until she will succumb to a natural accident of predation or exposure and give her small body back to the elements. I am certain she will have a personal burial at my own hands if I should happen to encounter her corpse. I rather hope this will happen....



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27 Feb. 1979

Epilogue: More than two years has passed without further evidence of this remarkable resident of Ordway nor her offspring.